

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Imagined Literacies: Race and Reading in Antebellum American Literature

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*Imagined Literacies* argues that antebellum ideologies of racial difference—the ways that early Americans sought to draw clear, fixed distinctions between people of different races—were reflected in, and themselves changed to reflect, new representations of black readers and black reading practices in mainstream literature. Black readers became increasingly visible within American society in the early nineteenth century. While writing by white Americans often featured representations of black people reading, most of those representations were directed towards a white reading audience, drawing a sharp implied distinction between the readers they addressed and those whom they claimed to represent. But written depictions of black readers frequently undermined such an easy distinction between address and representation, as their authors struggled to reconcile the potential co-presence of black and white readers with the various ideas of racial difference (including narratives of biological, cultural, and ontological difference) that regulated other interactions between black and white Americans.

As white writers sought to balance the egalitarian implications of mass literacy with the hierarchical relationships generated by ideas of racial difference, and as black writers sought to position reading as a potential (although not unqualified) avenue towards self-determination, each group grappled with foundational questions about what

a democratic reading public would look like. Those conversations centered on the idea of shared texts: texts whose social significance lay as much in their ability to be circulated between reading audiences of different races as it did in their ideological content. By reading works of fiction by Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Montgomery Bird, and Harriet Beecher Stowe alongside circulating texts such as abolitionist pamphlets and the *Liberia Herald*, I argue that shared texts were an important tool for imagining and articulating the status of black readers in an American reading public. In the process, I show how ideas of race and reading developed in concert with one another in the years leading up to the Civil War.

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